As a creator, the TikTok ban has alarming implications for us all

By Madison McMahon, Beacon Contributor

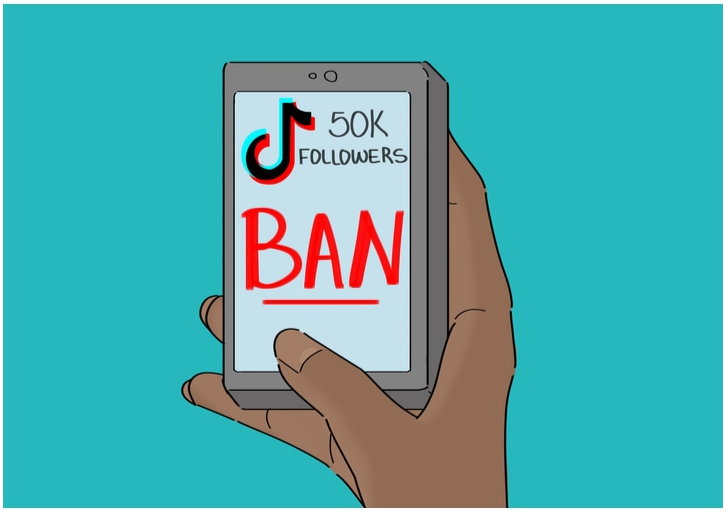

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Illustration Rachel Choi

When all the Supreme Court opinions and congressional news coverage told me in no uncertain terms that TikTok would be banned in the United States, I cried.

Over the past four years, I have cultivated a community of over 50,000 followers dedicated to learning and analyzing anything to do with books. I have made videos on everything from misconceptions about Charlotte Brontë, to in-depth analyses of "The Hunger Games" series, to writing advice. Besides the sales made from my own book, "The Son of Mara," that I promoted through TikTok, just last June I joined the app's monetization program where I made over $6,000 by the end of the year.

TikTok isn't just entertainment to me, it's my livelihood.

For years, answering my followers' book-related questions and making videos curated to their interests had been a part of my daily routine. Comment after comment told me how I had made higher literary education accessible to everyone from preteens to retirees. How I motivated them to tackle classic literature, how they finally found someone who explained topics in a way that makes sense, how I inspired them to simply read because they never felt confident in their ability to.

I wasn't just losing my income—the monthly payments creators receive for their videos—or my star bullet point on my resume, people were losing access to education that is usually behind a paywall or academic jargon.

I didn't just cry for myself. I cried for them too.

So when TikTok came back only fourteen hours later with the welcome message—"As a result of President [Donald] Trump's efforts, TikTok is back in the U.S.!"—it felt like emotional whiplash. After all, was Trump not the one who put the idea of a TikTok ban forward in the first place?

On Aug. 6, 2020, Trump wrote in an executive order, "mobile applications developed and owned by companies in the People's Republic of China (China) continues to threaten the national security, foreign policy, and economy of the United States. At this time, action must be taken to address the threat posed by one mobile application in particular, TikTok."

But now, Trump has framed himself as the savior of TikTok—an app dominated by his most resistant demographic of left-leaning Gen Z. It was all too intentional.

The simplicity of how awful this was brought me back to what movies from my childhood taught me. In Pixar's "The Incredibles," Syndrome creates catastrophes so he can save the very people he endangered in the first place. Syndrome is the villain.

In my teenage years, this idea was reinforced again in George Orwell's "1984" with the quote, "It appeared that there had even been demonstrations to thank Big Brother for raising the chocolate ration to twenty grams a week. And only yesterday ... it had been announced that the ration was to be reduced to twenty grams a week." Big Brother is the villain.

When I opened TikTok less than 24 hours after the ban was lifted, I saw that all of my followers were still there and I would still be getting the thousand dollar paycheck that was on hold during the ban. It was as if nothing had happened. As if all that fear about providing for myself and helping my followers through other social media platforms was a self-induced hallucination. I felt as though I had been manipulated.

The ban pushed my fear and anxiety to the highest degrees in hopes I would be grateful to the one who eased them. This calculated move was intended to make me think Trump was the one who ensured I could still get groceries without spending anxiety. Trump was the one who protected my community's avenue of learning. And he has solidified himself as the same person who could take it away on a whim.

I am not the only person who has realized this. The week following the TikTok ban, I gained over 13,000 followers because my most popular series "AP Banned Books with Madison" seems like a vital resource when Trump and his appointees support heavy censorship over anything that deals with racism, anti-establishment ideas, or LGBTQ+ content. People are scared of having information taken from them just as easily as TikTok was.

This fear though, as valid as it is, is an incentive to do something difficult.

The morning of the ban, I woke up with zero followers. I had nowhere and nothing to post that day, so I picked up a newspaper and read it while I ate breakfast. As I read, I found I still had thoughts, ideas, and analyses stirring in my brain. My avenue for expression was taken away, but my abilities were not and could never be.

This ban and reinstallment is a reminder of what can never be taken from any of us. Whether you love comedy or sports, the ability to enjoy or do those things yourself is possible outside of an app. Now it's clear it's better to cultivate those interests in real life instead of an app that has been used as a manipulation tool.

Though it might not be as easy, accessible, or curated as me explaining the book a follower requested, in this new presidential term of manipulation, terror, and restrictions, it is time to prioritize what cannot be taken from you.

Though there is validity in those feelings, it's not time to get scared—it's time to get active. Start reading, start creating, start exercising, and start being loud about it.

While it is true our current time period is reminiscent of terrifying regimes throughout history, let us not forget another aspect of those similarities. Every single time, we have overcome. Love, hope, and kindness have always persisted and won.